

# The Meaning of Trust in Educational Leadership – Determinants of building trust in educational leadership

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the factors building trust in school environment, with particular focus on leadership. School may be considered a public trust organization. It seems important then to discuss the meaning of trust from the point of view of the concept of educational leadership. The paper presents an analysis of trust in the context of educational leadership. It gives the definitions of trust and describes the meaning of trust in school environment and the model of forming trust to an educational leader. A detailed analysis of trust to a leader was conducted on the basis of the literature overview.

**Keywords:** trust, leadership, education, educational leadership.

## Introduction

School is an organization where some determined correlations occur between particular groups and therefore social positions of particular actors and their roles resulting from them are defined. School heads, teachers, parents and students make up groups between which appear some ties. These groups have the ability to cooperate, which, thanks to the distribution of functions, allows the organization to endure. The ties occurring between particular groups are divided into objective, subjective and behavioural ones. The objectivity of ties stems from citizenship, place of residence and type of work. The subjectivity reflects the conditions that are objective for a given group, e.g. material status. These conditions are also connected to the common system of values. The behavioural character of ties is the manifestation of attitudes in the form of behaviours. There is also a moral tie that overlaps the types of ties mentioned above and is connected mostly with subjective ties. According to Kwiatkowski, educational leadership is connected to the three components of a moral tie which are trust, loyalty and solidarity. Particularly the first element plays a significant role in school. Trust in the processes of teaching, learning and educating has a particular value. Trust may be understood as a bet made on some uncertain future behaviours of others, composed of two elements: convictions and their practical expressions (Sztompka, 2007, pp. 69-71 ;Sztompka, 2004, pp. 184-185, 190; Kwiatkowski, pp.16-17).

It seems interesting to analyse trust in the context of educational leadership. The paper consists of a few parts. The first part presents the meaning of trust and defines trust with relation to educational leadership. The presented models point at the meaning of trust in the context of educational leadership, present the conditions and grounds for building trust and indicate the traits of a leader that are necessary for forming trust.

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## The meaning of trust in the contemporary school environment in the context of educational leadership

In literature, the notion of 'educational leadership' can be found more and more often with reference to education. Leadership is understood not only as a characteristic of an individual (school head) but as the result of cooperation of many people in school. It could be said that leadership is an organizational feature, the potential connected not only to the charisma, authority, or vision of different individuals (school head, teachers, non-teaching staff, etc.) but, above all, to the ability to increase the participation of the organization's members in the process of making decisions (Mazurkiewicz, 2012). Modern leaders should focus on planning the processes of cooperation in a way that would give all the employees the opportunity to use their potentials coming from their knowledge, experience and motivation and to reach for some determined results and goals (Blanchard, 2007).

The observation of the changes in the system of education allows us to notice the risk and uncertainty that accompany educational processes. Various methods of coping with numerous reforms and different expectations posed to the system of education are looked for. Trust is a strategy of coping with risk. It seems that also with reference to the system education trust is of particular importance. We can distinguish institutional trust but also group, individual and systemic trust. Trust is a necessary condition of cooperation between particular groups and in the relations that appear within them. In the case of leadership, when there are many diverse groups within the school, trust between those groups is required. We could point at the trust between the school head and teachers, but also between the teachers and students or parents, or between the school head and parents. According to Fink, the 'starting point for any relationship. In fact the very foundation of human society is trust' (Fink, 2005, p. 45; Fink, p. 45; Precey (2012), p. 12). Trust is connected to the belief that the individual in charge of management is honest, and is conditioned by authentic interpersonal relations, which, in turn, makes the individual (in that case – the leader) act according to the expectations, do what they say they will do, which allows for the fulfilment of the planned goals.

Tschannen-Moran states that *'Trust can no longer be taken for granted in schools. It must be conscientiously cultivated and sustained – and school leaders bear the largest responsibility for setting a tone of trust. It is time for school leaders to become knowledgeable about cultivating trust because trustworthy leadership is at the heart of successful schools'* (Tschannen-Morgan). He describes a few points that demonstrate the meaning of trust to an educational leader; these are:

- „School leaders that have trust of their community are more like to be successful in creating a productive environment,
- Trust is a challenge for schools at this point in history, when all of our institutions are under unprecedented scrutiny,
- Much responsibility for realizing our society's vision of greater equity is entrusted to our schools. Consequently, higher expectations are especially brought to bear on those who educate our children,
- Without trust, schools are likely to flounder in their attempts to provide constructive educational environments and meet the challenging goals that our society has set for them, because the Energy need to solve the complex problem of educating a diverse group of students is diverted towards self-protection.
- Trustworthy leadership is at the heart of productive schools” (Tschannen-Morgan)

Trust can be perceived and analysed from many perspectives. The most frequently, trust is analysed as: an element of social capital, the foundation of social interactions, organization's resource, expectation of future actions of individuals and groups and relations within a given organization. Trust is voluntary as the partners in the relation make the decision as to whether it is worth trusting the other parties of the relation on their own. Trust is connected to risk as each of the parties has to bear in mind that the partner may prove dishonest and the results of the relation are uncertain. An important aspect

of trust is that it is not earned once and for all. Trust is dynamic and it changes in time, which means that it can be lost at any moment. What is more, it is built on the basis of the experience and knowledge not only of the individual who is willing to trust but also of others.

Trust is the foundation of social capital and the basis for cooperation between people. Literature brings many definitions of trust. From the psychological perspective, trust is defined as *'a complete confidence in someone, belief in someone, trustfulness'* (Sobol). On the sociological ground, trust is analysed from the perspective of interpersonal relations and its meaning for the society. Trust can be understood as *'a bet made on some uncertain future behaviours of others, composed of two elements: convictions and their practical expressions'* (Sztompka, 2007, pp. 69-71). Baier claimed that *'trust is reliance on others' competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm, things one cares about which are entrusted to their care'* (Baier, 1986, p. 128). And Zacher emphasized that *'trust is a process (of building trust, mounting of favourable conditions and creating features) and its 'product' or a given state of trust (...) Trust is often defined as a relation, whose characteristic is the expectation of partner's actions according to the cultural norms and values in a given society, or better – in a given place and time'* (Zacher, 2003, p. 33).

A similar analysis of trust is proposed by F. Fukuyama who believes that *'trust is a mechanism based on the assumption that other members of the community present an honest and cooperative behaviour based on the common norms'* (Fukuyama, 1997, p. 38). In literature, we can come across definitions of trust in the context of social capital, sociological and psychological analyses and those connected to management. However, what is emphasised the most often is that trust has a proportional influence on undertaking cooperation between the members of the group (a given community) and is a factor that conditions the endurance of such a community (Putman, 1995, pp. 264-265).

According to Uslaner, trust has to be seen as a moral value which can be considered on a normative or strategic level. *'Normative trust is a moral imperative to treat people well, even if they do not requite'* (Uslaner, 2008, p. 183). It is the basic kind of trust that we learn from our parents – the first moral teachers in our lives. This kind of trust stems from the conviction that *'the world is full of good will and good people and that everything is going to be better'* (Uslaner, 2008, p. 186). Moral trust is connected to the general assumption that people act according to certain rules and can be trusted. Whereas, strategic trust occurs in contacts with different people and is formed on the basis of knowledge, or the gathered information and experiences. *'Strategic trust reflects our expectations as to how other people behave'* (Uslaner, 2008, p. 190). This kind of trust is built gradually, depending on the gathered knowledge on other's action.

It is important to point at the levels of analysis of trust in school environment. We can quote two perspective here: with relation to an individual and as a certain indivisible whole. In the case of the first level, trust may be analysed as *'a correct anticipation of other people's actions, which influence the way in which an individual acts, as the choice has to be made before it is possible to observe other people's actions'* (Sztompka, 2007, p. 71). On the second level – an indivisible whole – trust is presented as *'a socially acquired and confirmed expectation that people have towards one another, towards the institutions and organizations that they live in and towards the moral principles of social life that determine the basic rules of their lives'* (Barber, 1983). Both levels of analysis of trust may be referred to school. In case of trust to an individual, we should address trust to particular teachers but also to the school head and students. In the analysis of trust a certain whole, the trust to school is formed as trust to a coherent institution.

In literature concerning trust, we can find many classifications of trust. At that point, it is worth quoting the types of trust suggested by Sztompka who distinguished the following kinds of trust:

- Personal (interpersonal) – it refers to particular individuals with whom we interact; in this group, we can name family, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, colleagues, people with whom we have relations of any kind. In school, this kind of trust occurs on many levels of

relations, which are: teacher-student, school head-teacher, teacher-parent, parent-school head, etc.

- Social – directed towards a group of people from the broader or closest surroundings of a given individual. It is important to stress that between the members of the community no interpersonal relations occur; it can be for instance a school community.
- Positional – embracing some particular social roles, professions, officials and positions. Relations here stem from a given social position, performing an institutional role. Trust is inspired here through professional behaviour and acting according to the standards, norms and regulations required in a given position. Here, trust is of particular importance with reference to the school head or particular teachers.
- Public – directed towards institutions or organization, understood as a set of structural rules in which particular functions occur. It is important that direct contact with the addressee of trust is not necessary. Here, trust refers to school as an entire institution.
- Technological – it includes trust to various technical systems.
- Commercial – connected to the relations client-institution. Most often it is directed towards a product (service) of a particular mark, company. Here, trust to school may be shaped as trust to an institution offering educational services.
- Systemic – directed towards the entire system, e.g. the economy, political system or civilization. Here we can talk about trust to the entire system of education (Sztompka, 2002, p. 229).

Particularly in the case of school, personal, social, positional and public trust is important. Some factors that may foster building trust should be indicated. Trust is not an obvious thing in schools. It has to be conscientiously cultivated and sustained – and school leaders are the most responsible for shaping trust. The time has come for school leaders to pay attention to building trust. Credible and trustworthy leaders should be able to build trust because trustworthy leadership lies at the foundation of schools' successes.

In literature, the notion of 'educational leadership' appears, particularly with reference to the analysis of schools' possibilities to adapt to the ever-changing conditions of the environment. Leadership is here understood mostly not as a feature of an individual (the school head only) or even of a group (of teachers and school's employees) but as an organizational whole or the result of many people's cooperation. It is important to notice that the leadership potential is connected not only to the charisma, authority or vision of individuals but to the ability of increasing the participation of the organization's members in the decision-making process (Mazurkiewicz, 2012, p. 35). Leadership is an interpersonal phenomenon, connecting the employer with the employee. People who function in school have to accept the leader and want to be led. Lack of trust or distrust may be a source of many problems and difficulties, particularly when the organization faces some difficulties and information reaches the leader with delays. Trust to the leader may create the conditions for the development of openness and involvement of the subjects that operate in the school's area (Wyrobek, 2013).

Modern leaders should focus on planning the processes of cooperation in a way that enables the activation of the potential of particular individuals in the group, coming from their knowledge, motivation, experiences and aimed at achieving the determined results and goals. Frequently, the considerations on leadership focus on the relations between leadership style and school's organizational culture. More and more often, commonality of actions is mentioned as a way of fulfilling the organization's goals. Leaders never act individually, the best schools are communities bound by trust between people. However, it is worth looking at the issue of educational leadership in a broader way and reflect on how leadership may influence the creation of trust within the school environment or of trust to a given school.

## **Models of building trust and educational leadership.**

### **Factors forming trust to the leader in school environment.**

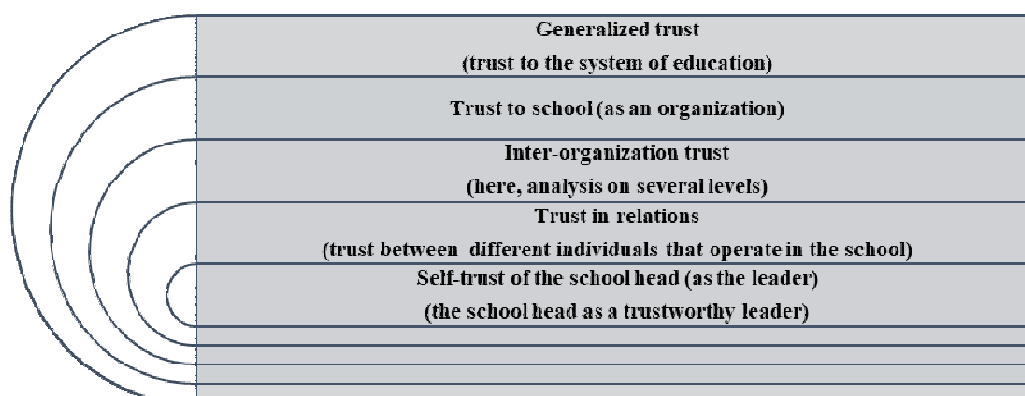
The crisis of trust is considered one of the problems of contemporary educational leadership. The school head should be the guarantor of trust and create conditions for building trust in the school environment. Trust is an indispensable element of modern educational leadership that forms not only trust in school but also of the particular subjects that operate in the school's area. In literature concerning trust and leadership, we can find studies concerning factors shaping trust in school environment. Analyses of trust to leaders are conducted from different perspectives. In studies concerning trust, managerial trust, trust in organization, trust to the leader in an organization, inter-organizational trust, trustworthy managerial behaviours and trust to the leader are described thoroughly (Wyrobek, 2013). Trust to the leader may be shaped by a few factors. Most often the following are mentioned: propensity, ability, benevolence, integrity. Below, we present the characteristics of the models of shaping trust that, according to the author, may prove useful in building trust to a leader in school environment. We point at the features and competencies of educational leaders and at conditions that enable the creation of trust.

According to the model of leadership based on Covey's concept, trust may be one of the factors of efficient leadership next to credibility, delegating responsibility and creating structures and systems (Covey, Merrill, 2006). Value-centred leadership should be realized on four levels simultaneously, which are:

- Personal – attitude to oneself,
- Interpersonal – relations with other people,
- Management – delegating responsibility for tasks carried out by other people,
- Organizational – organizing people's work (connected, among other things, to recruitment of new employees, trainings, remuneration, building teams, forming systems and structures, solving problems, formulating strategies) [Covey; Szafran].

The presented model emphasises the role of the leader, his or her special influence on forming an environment in which the members of the organization will feel safe, as only in such conditions they are able to trust and then involve in fulfilling common goals. Distrust or lack of trust will be a serious barrier in communication and may inhibit the development of the organization. It should also be indicated how trust may be built from the perspective of an educational leader.

We can point at a few stages of forming trust in school environment (Graph 1.). Trust should be formed in several stages, starting from trust to the school head, through trust in relations with different members (subjects) of the school community, including trust within the organization and trust to school, ending with trust to the entire system of education. The presented model includes five stages of building trust (the so-called circles of trust), which are trust to oneself – '*self-trust*' of the school head (the leader as a trustworthy person), trust in relations (between particular individuals that operate in the school), trust within the organization (on different levels, e.g. school head-teachers, teachers-children, school head-children, etc.), trust to the school as an institution (the school is treated as an organization that is supposed to achieve certain results or goals, here, the relations school head-parents, teachers-parents are important) and generalized trust (social) connected to systemic trust – here, to the system of education (the belief that a given system fulfils the planned goals and tasks).

**Graph 1.** Circles of building trust in school

Source: own elaboration, based on Covey S., Merrill R. (2006). *Szybkość zaufania. Jak dzięki zaufaniu przyspieszyć sukces w biznesie*. Poznań: Rebis.

Making use of the presented model, it is important to note that trust should be built gradually. The most important stage of building trust should be forming 'self-trust' of the school head as the leader. The school head should build his or her image as a trustworthy, credible person. Here, most frequently two features of school heads that enable forming trust are mentioned, these are character and competencies.

The first feature – character – is connected to righteousness and intentions. Righteousness means honesty in action and is connected to firmness and coherence of functioning. The school head should act according to the convictions and values that he or she holds as true. Whereas intentions are connected to motifs that drive him or her and plans that are manifested in actions. In case the person has some hidden goals, it will be difficult to believe that his or her main purpose is the good of others, all that such a person does or says will be doubted. It is important that the leader cares not only for his or her interests and personal good but for the general good of the institution. In case the leader's own goals are realized in the first place, it will be hard to earn trust from others.

The other feature – competencies – is connected to the abilities and action results of a given individual. Abilities are the means that are used to achieve goals, we can name technical, organizational and social abilities here. Abilities may also be described as capabilities that refer to professionalism, experience, knowledge and talents. In reality, these are means through which the result may be achieved. Results refer to the history of a given individual's functioning and his or her experiences. If the school head does not achieve what he or she is expected, his or her credibility (trust) decreases.

Trust to the school head may be formed by a number of actions, among which we can mention the following:

- Speaking directly to particular individuals,
- Showing respect to others,
- Building transparency (so that it is possible to verify the words said, being authentic, not hiding information),
- Mending mistakes (harms),
- Showing loyalty (recognizing others' merits, representing those who are absent and cannot speak for themselves),
- Providing the results (registering the results of actions, setting clear goals of action, not justifying if the tasks are not realized)
- Facing the reality (speaking about difficult issues directly, not avoiding problems),
- Setting expectations clearly (specifying expectations clearly, discussing expectations, renegotiating expectations, not assuming that expectations are obvious for all). [based on Covey].

The second stage – trust in relations – is important also when it comes to building trust to the leader on various levels of relations. Here, we can mention the relations leader-teachers, leader-students, leader-parents, leader-other people who cooperate with the school. As far as forming this level of trust is concerned, there are thirteen behaviours that matter and these are the following:

1. Speaking directly
2. Showing respect
3. Caring for transparency
4. Mending harms
5. Showing loyalty
6. Exhibiting results
7. Self-improvement
8. Facing the reality
9. Specifying expectations
10. Assuming responsibility
11. Listening first
12. Keeping commitments
13. Giving trust (Covet, Małysa-Kaleta, 2015).

The two ‘circles’ of trust presented here are important from the point of view of the subject of the paper’s analysis. The subsequent waves of trust are also important as the stages of building trust to the school and to the entire system of education, they are not discussed here in details though due to the limitations of the article.

However, it is important to discuss the features of a leader that may create the conditions for building trust. Tschannen-Morgan, in his book *‘Trust Matters: Leadership for successful Schools,’* described five factors that create trust: benevolence, honesty, reliability, openness and competence [Tschannen-Morgan, 2014]. Benevolence is a value connected to trust and makes up its essence. Honesty is the basic value, necessary for creating trust. Honesty is connected to the character and authenticity of a trustworthy individual. Authenticity in turn is connected to the three basic aspects, which are credibility, avoiding manipulation and being ‘real.’ Authenticity should not be associated with playing simple roles only. Openness is a process in which people voluntarily share information, are willing to be subject to others or be under their control. Competencies are connected to having appropriate knowledge and the ability to achieve the set goals. Table 1. contains examples of behaviours shaping the five factors that create trust to the leader in school.

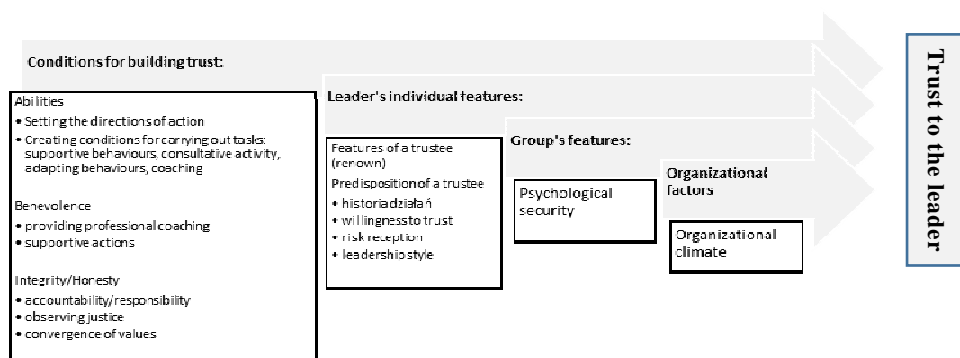
**Table 1.** Five Faces of Trust by Tschannen-Morgan

Benevolence	Caring, extending goodwill, demonstrating positive intentions, supporting teachers, expressing appreciation for faculty and Staff efforts, being fair, guarding confidential information
Honesty	Showing integrity, telling the truth, keeping promises, honouring agreements, being authentic, accepting responsibility, avoiding manipulation, being real, being true oneself
Openness	Maintaining open communication, sharing important information, delegating, sharing decision making, sharing power
Reliability	Being consistent, being dependable, showing commitment, expressing dedication, exercising diligence
Competence	Buffering teachers from outside disruptions, handling difficult situations, setting standards, pressing for results, working hard, setting an example, problem solving, resolving conflict, being flexible

Source: Tschannen-Morgan M. (2014). *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*. San Francisco: Wiley Brand; Hoy, W. K., Tschannen-Morgan, M. (1999). Five Faces of Trust: An Empirical Confirmation in Urban Elementary School. *Journal of School Leaders*, JSi Vol. 9 - May 1999.

A complex set of factors that enable building trust to leaders may be found in the work *Trust in leadership: A multi-level review and integration* (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, Salas, 2007). The multi-level model systemizes the factors of building trust to leaders in organizations and presents the advantages of the existing trust (effects of trust). The most important factors of forming trust include: conditions for building trust (abilities, benevolence, honesty and additional elements), the leader's individual features (renown, leader's predispositions to build trust), group and organizational factors. The graph below presents the integrated model of forming trust to leaders.

**Graph 2.** The integrated model of forming trust to leaders

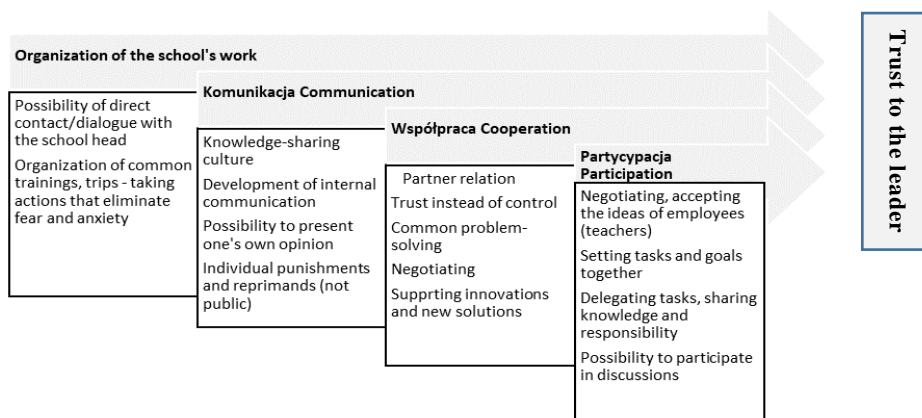


Trustee – here, the leader

Source: based on Integrated multi-level framework for understanding trust in leadership, Burke C., Sims D., Lazzara E., Salas E. (2014) *Trust in leadership: A multi-level review and integration*, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5810/c556791666c5aca28ef48dd7b9eacb19784c.pdf>

In the presented model, we can notice many determinants that form trust to the leader in school environment. The presented analyses allow us to distinguish various behaviours, features of a trustee (here – the leader) and of those who are willing to trust, and conditions of the organization's functioning. In the end, it seems worth mentioning the analysis of trust to the leader conducted by Poloczek: *Determinants of trust in the relationship between headmaster and teachers* (Poloczek, 2014). In the mentioned work, four basic areas of forming trust in the school reality were discussed, these are: organization of the school's work, communication, participation, cooperation (Poloczek, 2014). The graph below presents the abovementioned areas. They overlap partly with the organizational factors (organization of the school's work) presented in the previous model.

**Graph 3.** Areas of building trust to the leader in the school reality.



Source: based on Poloczek, J. (2014). Determinants of trust in the relationship between headmaster and teachers, *Contemporary Educational Leadership*, Vol.1, 3/2014



The best conditions for building trust in school occur when the leader, apart from his or her authority and formal management, is also considered an informal leader. In such conditions, the leader may enjoy real trust and support not only as an official person appointed to the position of the school head but also as a human. Such a leader must have some personality traits but should also have a lot of knowledge and abilities.

However, good intentions and leadership behaviours are not sufficient to increase trust and the efficiency of group work. The leader in the school environment should also care for sustaining the conditions for the development of trust in the entire school. He or she should be aware that the trust he or she is given by others in the school environment influences not only the trust to him- or herself but also the trust to other people who operate (function) in the school and the general trust to the school.

After Rogers, we can point at a few elements that should be taken into consideration in the process of building trust by an educational leader, these are:

- open communication (positive attitude, listening, disclosing information, openness to new ideas),
- consistency in action,
- creating trust on various levels (by self-knowledge – the so-called self-trust, common vision, building bridges in communication),
- building trust in team (maintaining self-esteem, support, praise, not keeping classified information, defence of others, avoiding gossiping, appreciating others' abilities and differences, improving the decision-making processes, taking into consideration other points of view, reducing conflicts, appreciating contribution) (Rogers, 1995, p. 14; Wyrobek, 2013).

To sum up, it could be stated that trust to leaders is formed by four key determinants, which are: achieving results, honesty, good intentions (benevolence) and appropriate competencies (abilities). Honesty is connected also to showing disapproval when the leader does not approve of some actions and decisions that are taken. It is also very important to show and express respect to all the people who function in the school environment. It is important to keep in mind also the organization of the school's work itself, cooperation between various subjects and co-participation of various people in the school environment.

## Summary (conclusions)

Accepting various and multi-level analyses of trust to leaders, we can point at some several common areas of forming trust. Trust to leaders is analysed on multiple levels, through different groups of factors. They include the following: the meaning of trust to the leader in school environment, features (faculties) of the trustee (the leader) necessary for building trust to the leader, setting the features of the environment (school environment) for building trust to the leader, through the analysis of factors of the school's organization (communication, co-participation, cooperation) and the features of groups that function in school. We must not forget about the factors connected to the general level of trust and the willingness to trust either. In many analyses, emphasis is put on the leader's features (e.g. righteousness, benevolence, good intentions, reliability, openness, honesty, etc.) and on appropriate competencies (abilities and skills). However, it is not less significant to clearly specify the results and goals of action. In the process of building trust to an educational leader, we have to pay attention to two issues in building trust. First, the influence of the leader him- or herself on building trust has to be assessed through the analysis of '*self-trust*.' Forming trust to the leader should start from an analysis of the leader's features and the conditions for building '*self-trust*.' Second, trust has to be formed in various areas and relations in school environment, with relation to different subjects.

Effective distributed leadership depends upon five key factors of trust:

- *values and attitudes*: beliefs that people cared for their students and would work hard for their benefit if they were allowed to pursue objectives they were committed to
- *disposition to trust*: experience of benefits derived from previous trusting relationships
- trustworthiness: the extent to which others trusted them
- *repeated acts of trust*: enabling the increasing distribution of leadership roles, responsibilities and accountabilities, and the broadening of stakeholder participation
- *building and reinforcing individual relational and organization trust*: through interactions, structures and strategies that demonstrated consistency in values and vision and resulted in success (Day, Sammons, 2016).

Well-built trust to the educational leader plays a very important role in the school's organization. It can arouse its activity, increase the opportunities of learning, and, what is more important, reduce the uncertainty of action, broaden the scope of cooperation and create a good atmosphere for the school's functioning. Trust to the leader is a difficult and complex task that should be formed gradually and with caution. The concept of trust in the analysis of educational leadership should be considered a buffer – protection of the relations occurring in school but also an element that determines communication in school. Trust can create conditions that foster the development of school as a whole organization and the perception of school as a trustworthy organization.

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